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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W (JHUNTER), CA/VOI, CA/VOL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/03/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [CVIS](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SL](#)
SUBJECT: OPPOSITION LEADER VISA ISSUE PLAYS OUT IN PRESS:
CDA VILIFIED

Classified By: CDA Glenn Fedzer for reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) Summary: SLPP party leader John Benjamin's potential inadmissibility to enter the United States has resulted in a series of attacks on the Embassy and the CDA by outlets aligned with Benjamin's party. Benjamin is the third member of the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) junta to have his admissibility thrown into question by an ongoing ICE investigation of human rights abuses during the NPRC's reign in the 1990's. Two prior applicants were turned around upon arrival, the first in September 2008. The travelers held valid visas and the inadmissibility was not noted in CLASS. The decision to advise Benjamin of his potential inadmissibility was done to avoid an embarrassing fallout, but backfired when he traveled despite the warning, and was admitted by ICE under a "differed inspection." Media articles noted that Benjamin was held and questioned by ICE upon his arrival to the U.S., while a June 3 article in the Awareness Times vilifies CDA, wondering if he is a "liability to Sierra Leone's peace-building process" and an "APC operative" used to discredit and undermine SLPP leadership, because of the CDA's attempt to "intimidate" Benjamin from traveling. Benjamin's still pending case, and the inconsistent handling of similar cases by ICE, created considerable credibility issues for Embassy Freetown. The reasoning behind the media attacks directed at CDA and Benjamin's motives to discredit CDA and the Embassy remain opaque - up to this point, Benjamin has been an excellent contact within the opposition party, and sought--and received--post assistance during recent political melees. Benjamin does not have such good relations with other members of the international community, including the UK. His handling of the situation was inflammatory and short-sighted, and it is impossible to predict his future behavior or the behavior of the often irrational Sierra Leonean press. This issue will likely continue to be a going concern for the conceivable future, particularly if ICE ultimately decides to legally refuse his entry or the Visa Office cancels his visa. End Summary.

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

¶2. (C) Following the detention and return of General Komba Mondeh (currently the Assistant Chief of Defense Staff-Operations) in September 2008, post communicated concerns with ICE officials regarding Sierra Leoneans entered in the TECS database by ICE but without a corresponding CLASS entry. Mondeh's entry refusal resulted in a scathing diplomatic note and request for an official apology, and post identified a need to determine how best to address similar refusals at the border in future, particularly ones, like Mondeh, that have a deleterious impact on USG political capital. When presented with the list of Sierra Leoneans under investigation for their roles in the NPRC coup, prominent Sierra Leoneans in positions of power were

identified, including Benjamin and Kellie Conteh, current National Security Council czar. The potential for political fallout if such individuals are denied entry into the United States is significant, particularly as such incidents would receive extremely vocal (and likely inaccurate) media attention. Further, individuals like Mondeh, Conteh, and Benjamin are contacts on critical issues with regards to security and the political climate, and however deserved a refusal into the U.S. may be, would be viewed by them as insults. Post opted to be pro-active in handling these situations to preserve needed communication links with these interlocutors.

¶3. (C) Knowing that some alleged human rights violators are in the TECS, but not CLASS, system, CDA made an inquiry with CA/VO/I and ICE regarding the status of a number of individuals, including members of a Vice Presidential delegation, Benjamin, and Conteh. VO passed to the CDA that Conteh and Benjamin are ineligible for entry. At the behest of CDA, Consul asked CA if these individuals could be informed of their inadmissibility: an affirmative response was received. In an effort to ensure that the potential denial of Benjamin, in particular, would not be identified as politically motivated, CDA informed Benjamin of his status on May 30. Despite stating that he would postpone a planned May 31 trip to the U.S., Benjamin chose to go ahead with his original plans. Post learned that Benjamin had attempted entry into the U.S. via AF/W on June 1, and subsequently learned that his case is pending and he entered the U.S. and is free to travel within the country until his hearing on July 2.

¶4. (C) Subsequent press reporting has varied from probing to scathing, June 2 articles commented on Benjamin's treatment in the U.S., with several stating that APC members had "hoodwinked" the USG into believing that Benjamin was involved in the December, 1992 massacre. Others stated that U.S. diplomats had attempted to persuade him not to travel, likely working on behalf of the APC party. A particularly damning article appearing on June 3 identified CDA as the culprit, questioning his intentions and credentials, and inferring the use of intimidation tactics. The article promises a further indictment of CDA on June 4.

COMMENT

¶5. (C) Post will work with CA/VO and ICE to ensure that information regarding alleged human rights abusers is moved into the CLASS system, and that the final adjudication on Benjamin's case moves forward. Post will also collaborate with ICE on the issue of consistency, as the previous refusals and returns of others relative to Benjamin's treatment is notable and problematic. Benjamin's motivations for using this incident to strengthen his own political image is unsurprising, but his underhanded support of an attack against the CDA remains opaque. The SLPP party has frequently targeted the international community as their enemy, including 2007 allegations that Koroma was elected due to diplomatic pressure on the National Electoral Commission for the "right" result. Benjamin has limited links to other diplomatic members, and only phoned emboffs on the evening of March 13 when his party office was attacked. Why he would choose to attack the CDA's well-intentioned information-sharing is a mystery, but the SLPP can now add another diplomatic mission to the list of those who view the SLPP with skeptical caution. End Comment.
FEDZER